2/15/99

OUR TOWN

Some black churches tolerate gay people but not their lifestyle

By **Patricia Merritt**
The Gazette

Patricia Merritt/The Gazette

The belief that homosexuality is a sin has kept Colorado College student Caprice Edwards, shown Thursday, away from church.

Kevin Gillis remembers the times he and his family spent in church in Troy, Ala.

Sunday mornings were filled with choir singing, hand clapping and preaching.

Every now and then, the minister mentioned homosexuality, grouping it with the other sins that could send one to the Lake of Fire.

Being gay was an undisputed sin in the black church Gillis grew up in. It was also a common belief among most blacks he knew, including his father, a pastor.

Gillis said he always wondered as a child if God loved him despite his homosexual feelings.

Today, the 33-year-old Colorado Springs man believes the Lord loves him. Gillis is also happy to say his religiously conservative family is devoted to him.

Gillis is part of the estimated 5.6 percent of all Americans who are gay. The estimate is from a 1996 General Social Survey by the National Opinion Research Center.

The study also reports gay men and lesbians make up nearly 6.5 percent of the black population.

More than 4 percent of American gay men and lesbians regularly attend church, the study said.

In the black community, Gillis said he's never experienced any gay bashing or hatred, though he's heard his share of sermons about the ills of homosexuality.

American blacks traditionally have deep roots in a strain of Christianity that interprets the Bible as speaking negatively about homosexuality.

"I affirm Kevin because he believes God has accepted him," said the Rev. Benjamin Reynolds, Gillis' pastor and senior minister at Emmanuel Missionary Baptist Church.

"I can't spend time demeaning him. There's no reason for it," Reynolds said. "I don't know that homosexuality is a sin."

Reynolds said he realizes his view is in the minority among most black clergy in Colorado Springs.

Still, Reynolds said, there always have been gays in the black community and church, and they've made large contributions.

"Black people have always gone to church, gay or not," Reynolds said. "I fear that many black gay people in the community have turned away from the church now because they don't want to be beat up on."

What the black church should concentrate on is loving and accepting everyone, he said.

"My whole thing is that I love people and I don't want to do anything to turn them away," Reynolds said. "The black church should be a liberation station."

However, being caring and loving doesn't mean sin can be condoned, said Gillis' friend, Medelia Walker.

"I don't believe God created anyone that way," said Walker, who has known Gillis for two years. "As Christians, if God says it's a sin, it's our duty to say: 'Yes, it's a sin.' We also have to show Christ's love. I don't think denying someone a decent job, a place to live or anything else like that is showing Christ's love.

"Kevin is a good person," she said. "I pray that he would change. But in the meantime, I still love him."

The Rev. Ralph Kelly said his church loves "sinners" — including those involved in the gay lifestyle. Kelly is pastor at Good News Church, part of the Church of Christ (Holiness) U.S.A. denomination. Kelly is also the manager of Ethnic Pastoral Outreach at Focus on the Family. He stresses his views are his own.

Kelly thinks homosexuality is a sin. "I would say that just as it is in the white community, we agree with what the Bible says," Kelly said.

That belief, held by some Christians, has kept Caprice Marie Edwards away from church.

"I'm at a point in my life where I want to be part of a religious community," said the 19-year-old. "It's hard to do when most of the religious community is against your fundamental lifestyle."

Edwards, a sophomore at Colorado College, has been openly lesbian for more than two years.

Last year, a co-worker overheard Edwards and a male co-worker express interest in an attractive young woman they saw.

"She told me that it was not natural to have the feelings that I had," Edwards said, "and that God didn't intend things to be that way."

Other than that incident,

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OUR TOWN

Attitudes/Some cite Bible as proof

From NEWS4

Edwards said she hasn't had any negative reactions in her hometown of Pueblo or on the college campus.

Younger people have helped change the mind of Willie Breazell about homosexuality. Breazell is president of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

"I used to see gays as a threat to me and my family," said the 54-year-old Breazell. "I heard it preached against in church."

The change in Breazell's thinking came as a result of his daughters Inez and Kim challenging his views. His daughters, who are heterosexual, have gay friends. The women introduced their father to these friends and told Breazell he was wrong to believe gay men and lesbians chose their lifestyle.

Breazell thinks many blacks resist the gay lifestyle because they believe it is a choice.

"I'm starting to think now that maybe it isn't a choice," Breazell said, "that maybe they're born with this."

Jerome Page, president and CEO of the Urban League of the Pikes Peak Region, said he is tolerant of homosexuality.

"My personal belief has been that it's your own business who you love or sleep with," Page said. "I'm not a biblical scholar, but I've been told that you can prove anything you want to in the Bible."

Like white slave masters who used a passage in the Bible to endorse the inhumane institution of slavery, Page said.

"Don't tell me that the Bible says we should discriminate against gays and lesbians."

Discrimination, after all, is the reason the Urban League exists, Page said.

"If you permit any institution or person to discriminate against anybody," Page said, "then look out, black folks."

Although most blacks may not openly discriminate against homosexuality, Gillis feels large numbers of people still think he's wrong.

"I respect that," he said. "They have a right to their beliefs. I'm firm in my belief. I believe Christ has accepted me. After all, he knew I was gay before anyone else did."

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The Gazette file

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OUR TOWN

Manufactured homes give couples affordable, spacious housing option

By **Susan Warmbrunn**/The Gazette

A young man held an infant on his lap as he talked to Sue Ellen Cox, a sales associate with WillMax Homes of Colorado.

He and his wife want to buy their first home. They don't make enough to afford what people at WillMax call "a land house," but they might be able to afford a spacious three-bedroom manufactured home, which WillMax sells.

"They're a young family tired of renting," Cox said. "They were born here, came back here, and have never bought a home before."

Many people buying manufactured or mobile homes are first-time home buyers, said Patrice Madden, a sales manager at WillMax Homes.

"They tend to buy in parks to start with, th.. move up to a land home," she said.

Young couples are looking for a way to get out of cramped apartment buildings, stop throwing away money on rent and start building equity.

Some people who come in have decent credit and good jobs but don't earn enough to make a down payment, Madden said. For about $60,000, they can buy a three-bedroom, 1,152 square-foot mobile home.

According to a 1996 study by the Foremost Insurance Co., the average age of a mobile home owner is 52.7 years; 29 percent of those owners are under the age of 40. Their median income is $23,300.

Mobile homes generally come in three basic sizes — single-, double- and triple-wide. They've been getting bigger over the years, Madden said. A standard single-wide used to be about 12 by 60 feet. Now, they're more often about 16 by 80 feet. WillMax Homes doesn't carry triple-wides, usually made of about 12-foot sections, because they can cost as much as $150,000.

"It prices people out of the affordable housing market," Madden said.

Mobile home manufacturers can offer three-bedroom homes for up to 25 percent less than site-built houses because mobile homes can be built year-round, inside and at one location.

The double-wides on sale at WillMax feature everything from sky lights to garden tubs. They come with various options, including whirlpool baths, wood-burning fireplaces and built-in stereos.

One double-wide, three-bedroom, 1,152 square-foot house on sale at WillMax had sunlights in the kitchen, a master bath and two full bathrooms, with design options for the counter tops, carpet and drapes.

Cox has sold mobile homes in Texas as well as Colorado. She sells to young couples buying their first houses and retirees buying their last.

Business is booming. As of July 1997, manufactured or mobile homes represented 23.6 percent of all new single-family housing starts, according to the Colorado Manufactured Housing Association.

In January, Fleetwood Enterprises Inc., the largest mobile home manufacturer, reported record sales during a nine-month period, raking in $2.54 billion, up 15 percent from last year.

Some of those homes, however, have nowhere to go.

The space crunch for manufactured homes is a statewide problem, said Michele Cato, the assistant director of Colorado Manufactured Housing Association.

There's land available, Cato said, but it's hard to get approval to develop manufactured home communities. As with other affordable housing options, proposals are often defeated by zoning regulations and not-in-my-back-yard arguments, she said.

"It really all goes back to perception of the industry," Cato said. "A lot of people think that manufactured homes are trailers and people that live in trailer parks are less desirable neighbors.

"As a result of that, there are very few new manufactured home communities being developed. There are a lot of people who want to do them, but they can't get approval at the local level. So then you have a supply-and-demand problem."

In Colorado Springs, people have come into Madden's office looking for park space because they've closed on a house but don't have anywhere to put it, Madden said. Sometimes, they end up putting their new house in storage until something opens up.

Susan Warmbrunn covers community issues and may be reached at 636-0247 or susanw@gazette.com

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